



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF TRANSPORTATION

EOT

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April 15, 2008

Secretary Ian A. Bowles
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Attn: Richard Bourre, EOEI #12565
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Re: ◻ Circumferential Transit Improvements in the Urban Ring Corridor – Phase 2
EOEA #12565
Notice of Project Change to Special Review Procedure

Dear Secretary Bowles:

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation and Public Works (EOT) is currently preparing a combined Revised Draft Environmental Impact Report/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIR/DEIS) for Phase 2 of the Circumferential Transit Improvements in the Urban Ring Corridor (Urban Ring Phase 2). The RDEIR/DEIS document is due to be completed by May 31, 2008 per the July 11, 2007 Certificate issued jointly by you and myself. This Certificate amended the Special Review Procedure (SRP) for Urban Ring Phase 2 to extend the deadline for filing the Urban Ring Phase 2 RDEIR/DEIS. With this letter, I request a NPC for the SRP for the purpose of further extending the filing schedule by six months.

EOT has made extensive progress toward developing a technically sound proposal for the Urban Ring Phase 2 that also enjoys a high level of stakeholder support, and EOT has been planning to meet the May 31, 2008 RDEIR/DEIS deadline. However, due to the delay that resulted from incorporating updated demographic assumptions and a very comprehensive technical and stakeholder coordination process, EOT is not able to provide adequate time for review of a draft DEIS document, especially by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and by the Urban Ring Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). Therefore, EOT must request an extension of the May 31, 2008 RDEIR/DEIS filing deadline to November 30, 2008.

Project Description

The Circumferential Transit Improvements in the Urban Ring Corridor (Urban Ring) is a proposed system of public transit improvements in a roughly 20-mile long, generally circumferential corridor located just beyond the Boston central core, in Chelsea, Everett,

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Medford, Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline and Boston. The Urban Ring is intended to serve key residential neighborhoods, employment centers, and other activity centers within the corridor, and to connect the spokes of the MBTA's existing radial transit system. This would improve transit access and mobility for people in the corridor and throughout the region by enabling faster connections within the Urban Ring corridor; providing better transit travel times from existing radial transit lines to points in the Urban Ring corridor; easing congestion in the central subway system; and increasing overall MBTA system ridership.

The Urban Ring is proposed for implementation in three additive phases. Phase 1 has entailed a series of improvements to the existing MBTA bus network in the Urban Ring corridor, including Crosstown Bus services and other bus service improvements. Phase 2 would add a series of new, overlapping Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes in the corridor, along with expanded bus routes and transfer connections with rapid transit and commuter rail lines; Phase 2 is the subject of the current planning and environmental review. Phase 3 would add new light rail or heavy rail transit service in the western portion of the corridor, generally from Sullivan Square in Charlestown to Dudley Square in Roxbury; Phase 3 will require a separate planning and environmental review process that would be undertaken in the future.

Urban Ring Phase 2 Progress and Status

The Circumferential Transportation Improvements in the Urban Ring Corridor project (the "Urban Ring" project) has been in planning and environmental review for many years. A circumferential transit project in this general corridor was originally proposed as a public transit replacement project for the Inner Belt Highway in the early 1970s, and it was the subject of a feasibility study in the 1980s.

In July 2001, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) published a Major Investment Study (MIS) for the Urban Ring project that established the general project corridor and proposed the three-phase implementation strategy that is designed to enable more timely response to travel needs in the corridor; build ridership and demand in the corridor; and manage the financial demands of the project. This MIS was also accompanied by an Expanded Environmental Notification Form (EENF) that was filed with EOEA at the same time.

The MIS and EENF were followed on November 30, 2004 by a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Urban Ring Phase 2, in compliance with the Department of Environmental Protection's Administrative Consent Order (ACO). On May 20, 2005, MEPA issued a Certificate on the DEIR in which the Secretary determined that the "... *DEIR submitted for this project adequately and properly complies with [MEPA],*" while requiring the MBTA to submit a Notice of Project Change (NPC) proposing a Special Review Procedure (SRP) for re-linking the MEPA and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes.

On August 31, 2005, the MBTA filed such an NPC with MEPA. On November 17, 2005, MEPA issued a new Certificate on the SRP agreeing to the deadlines proposed in the NPC for filing an Urban Ring Phase 2 RDEIR/DEIS; a Final EIR/Final EIS Urban Ring Phase 2; a Draft EIR/Draft EIS for Urban Ring Phase 3; and a commitment to file Final EIR/Final EIS for Urban Ring Phase 3 at a later time (to be determined). The Certificate also added new members to the Urban Ring CAC.

At around this time, in September 2005, EOT informed the MBTA and EOEA that in accordance with Chapter 196 of the Acts of 2004, EOT has assumed financial responsibility for capital costs of major expansions of the MBTA system. In keeping with this financial responsibility, EOT's

Office of Transportation Planning (EOT Planning) has assumed responsibility for planning and environmental review of major expansion projects on the MBTA system. As a result, EOT Planning now directs the expansion planning of the MBTA, including the RDEIR/DEIS for Urban Ring Phase 2.

EOT has managed the Urban Ring Phase 2 RDEIR/DEIS planning and environmental review process. During the course of this process, EOT requested an extension of the MEPA filing deadlines that were included in the November 17, 2005 Certificate in order to address concerns raised by Urban Ring CAC members about demographic projections in the Urban Ring corridor. As a result, a July 11, 2007 Certificate extended the Urban Ring MEPA filing deadlines to the following schedule:

- File a RDEIR/DEIS for Urban Ring Phase 2 with both MEPA and the FTA no later than May 31, 2008.
- File a Final EIR/Final EIS for Urban Ring Phase 2 with both MEPA and FTA no later than June 30, 2009.
- File a Draft EIR/Draft EIS for Urban Ring Phase 3 with both MEPA and FTA no later than June 30, 2011.
- A Final EIR/Final EIS will be filed at a subsequent date, yet to be determined. As previously anticipated, the Scope for the Phase 3 EIR/EIS would be defined through a coordinated MEPA/FTA process at a later date. The Scope of this Final EIR for Phase 3 would be issued in the same time frame as the Certificate on the Phase 2 FEIR.

Since that Certificate was issued, EOT has continued to work steadily on the Urban Ring Phase 2 planning and environmental review process, and has pursued those deadlines. Since the July 11, 2007 Certificate, the project team has completed the following tasks:

- Executed thorough technical analysis of nine Build Alternatives, including travel demand modeling, ridership projections, neighborhood and environmental impacts, and cost estimates.
- Identified the best elements of the nine Build Alternatives and assembled these elements into three narrowed-down “hybrid alternatives” (based on the results of the technical analysis and input from CAC members, the general public, and other stakeholders).
- Analyzed the hybrid alternatives, including detailed travel demand modeling, ridership projections, neighborhood and environmental impacts, and cost estimates, as well as conceptual design, engineering studies, and traffic analysis.
- Held ten meetings of the Urban Ring CAC and its various subcommittees: Alternatives and Variants; Traffic and Transportation; Finance and Development; and Noise, Vibration and Electromagnetic Force Impacts.
- Conducted over 60 project briefings and coordination meetings for numerous groups, including neighborhood groups, advocacy groups, business groups, project stakeholders, institutions, and public agencies.
- Identified preliminary alignment recommendations that incorporate the best elements of the three “hybrid alternatives” (based on the results of the technical analysis and input from CAC members, the general public, and other stakeholders).

EOT has been pursuing the May 31, 2008 filing deadline for the RDEIR/DEIS actively and in good faith. EOT has completed most of the technical work and documentation, but has been delayed by unexpected issues with the updated demographic assumptions, and by extensive technical coordination and discussions designed to evaluate a wide range of different options and to build stakeholder support not only on alignment recommendations but also strategies for implementation and financing.

Demographic Assumptions

In keeping with federal guidance, the Urban Ring Phase 2 ridership projections are based on the horizon year 2030 demographic assumptions from the Boston Region MPO's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). In the winter and spring of 2007, members of the Urban Ring CAC and others asserted that a number of rapidly-growing employment centers within the Urban Ring corridor included only minor employment growth for the 2030 horizon year, which could result in Urban Ring Phase 2 ridership projections that are too low.

In response to these concerns, EOT requested the previous extension of the RDEIR/DEIS filing deadline to May 31, 2008 in order to provide the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) with additional time to update its demographic assumptions. MEPA granted this extension, and EOT worked with the Boston Region MPO to update these demographic projections. A second round of model coding, coordination, travel demand forecasting, interpretation, and presentation of results was completed in the late summer of 2007 using updated demographics provided by the Boston Region MPO.

Unfortunately, the travel demand modeling revealed technical inconsistencies with these assumptions, requiring a third round of demographic assumptions. These demographic assumptions were not completed until December 2007, which delayed final modeling and ridership projections on the Urban Ring Phase 2 alternatives. This resulted in significant delay relative to EOT's assumed schedule for meeting the May 31, 2008 RDEIR/DEIS filing deadline.

Technical and Stakeholder Coordination

EOT has also undertaken a very thorough and comprehensive coordination process. This coordination, with the CAC and with corridor stakeholders and abutters, has entailed extensive technical analysis and consultation on strategies for project implementation and financing.

EOT has conducted numerous technical coordination sessions with CAC members and other project stakeholders. The project team developed detailed engineering analyses on multiple sub-options for areas of the corridor that include Inner Belt, Lower Cambridgeport, the Charles River Crossing, Allston Landing/Beacon Park Yards, Mountfort Street, and the Longwood Medical and Academic Area. These engineering analyses have included thorough traffic impact studies, increased environmental review of a broader potential impact area, and detailed design efforts, for both surface and tunnel alternatives.

This extensive coordination with CAC members, the public, and project stakeholders has been designed to examine a broad range of potential alignment options and implementation strategies, and to build support for local alignment recommendations and for project implementation strategies.

Proposal and Document Review

In advance of filing the Urban Ring Phase 2 RDEIR/DEIS, EOT needs to distribute draft materials to a number of parties in order to enable advance review of the project proposal and of the documentation supporting the project proposal. These parties include the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), the MBTA, and the Urban Ring CAC. EOT will also need to review key elements of the recommendations with critical state and federal resource agencies.

EOT understands the importance of this document review, and has been trying to facilitate this review in advance of the May 31, 2008 deadline. However, EOT's continued technical and implementation coordination has delayed EOT's final recommendations. Because EOT has not yet selected an implementation and filing strategy, it has not been able to release the draft RDEIR/DEIS materials. As a result, there is not adequate time for review of draft materials, so EOT cannot meet the May 31, 2008 deadline.

The timing of the FTA review of the project proposal and draft RDEIR/DEIS document is particularly critical to the filing deadline. FTA is the agency that will officially release the DEIS, to satisfy requirements of the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Because of this, FTA must be fully conversant with, and supportive of, the contents of the DEIS. EOT must therefore provide FTA with adequate time to review the proposed project alignment and operating plan; the implementation and financing plan; and the supporting documentation. For a project as large and complex as the Urban Ring Phase 2, this will be an extensive document. In addition, the FTA Region 1 office expects to have a number of other major documents from EOT and the MBTA under review at roughly the same time, including the Silver Line finance plan and the Green Line Extension DEIS. These other projects are scheduled to advance before the Urban Ring Phase 2 and it is important that FTA be able to complete these evaluations in a timely manner. Therefore, in consideration of the FTA staffing and review capacity, and in light of existing project priorities, it is not realistic to expect that FTA would be able to complete a review of the Urban Ring Phase 2 projects by the May 31st deadline.

In light of the status of the project and the review requirements, EOT must request an extension of the May 31, 2008 deadline to November 30, 2008. This will enable a comprehensive review of the RDEIR/DEIS recommendations and document by the various review parties. EOT will make use of this time to continue coordination with the CAC and other stakeholders on critical issues of project implementation and financing, which can be addressed more fully once the RDEIR/DEIS recommendations and implementation strategy have been finalized.

EOT proposes the following general schedule for completing the RDEIR/DEIS by November 30, 2008:

- CAC meeting in May 2008 to present alignment and general implementation recommendations.
- Public meetings on Urban Ring Phase 2 recommendations in late May/early June 2008.
- EOT coordination with MBTA, CAC, and other stakeholders on finance plan in May and June 2008.
- Draft RDEIR/DEIS chapters on purpose and need, alternatives analysis, and implementation provided to FTA, MBTA and the Urban Ring CAC by June 15, 2008; review complete by September 1, 2008.

- Draft RDEIR/DEIS chapters on transportation system, environmental analysis, and finance plan provided to FTA, MBTA and the Urban Ring CAC by July 15, 2008; review complete by October 1, 2008.
- EOT review of comments, coordination with FTA, MBTA and CAC, and completion of RDEIR/DEIS document by November 30, 2008.

Proposed Schedule Extension

With this letter, EOT requests an extension of 6 months for the RDEIR/DEIS filing deadline. Because this extension will affect the subsequent filing deadlines, I also request six month extensions for those filings. Therefore, I propose the following filing schedule:

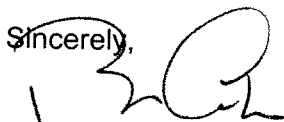
- File the RDEIR/DEIS for Urban Ring Phase 2 with both MEPA and FTA no later than November 30, 2008.
- File the Final EIR/Final EIS for Urban Ring Phase 2 with both MEPA and FTA no later than December 31, 2009.
- File a Draft EIR/Draft EIS for Urban Ring Phase 3 with both MEPA and FTA no later than December 31, 2011.
- A Final EIR/Final EIS will be filed at a subsequent date, yet to be determined. As previously anticipated, the Scope for the Phase 3 EIR/EIS would be defined through a coordinated MEPA/FTA process at a later date. The Scope of this Final EIR for Phase 3 would be issued in the same time frame as the Certificate on the Phase 2 FEIR.

I wish to reiterate the fact that EOT takes this NPC request very seriously. EOT and the Urban Ring Phase 2 project team have been working diligently and making a good faith effort to meet the May 31, 2008 filing deadline for the RDEIR/DEIS. We only make this request because there has been additional delay associated with the previous changes to the demographic assumptions, because we have taken additional time to try to address stakeholders' technical and procedural input, and because we need to provide adequate time for review of the project proposal and documentation for the CAC, FTA, and other agencies that we need to coordinate with. Nevertheless, EOT will work with the CAC and other stakeholders to advance the completion and filing of the RDEIR/DEIS as expeditiously as possible.

This letter will be posted to the project website at www.theurbanring.com. It will also be provided to all CAC members and distributed electronically to all members of the public on the project's email list. I request that the Secretary provide notice of this NPC in the next edition of the Environmental Monitor and accept public comment on the NPC for twenty days, then issue a Certificate on the NPC.

If you have any questions, please contact Ned Codd, EOT Manager for Plan Development, at 617-973-7474.

Sincerely,



Bernard Cohen
Secretary of Transportation

cc: Urban Ring Phase 2 Citizens Advisory Committee Members
Congressman Michael E. Capuano
Congressman Barney Frank
Congressman Stephen F. Lynch
Senator Jarrett T. Barrios
Senator Cynthia Stone Creem
Senator Jack Hart
Senator Patricia D. Jehlen
Senator Steven A. Tolman
Senator Marian Walsh
Senator Dianne Wilkerson
Representative Salvatore F. DiMasi
Representative Paul J. Donato
Representative Linda Dorcea Forry
Representative Gloria L. Fox
Representative Kevin G. Honan
Representative Rachel Kaprielian
Representative Elizabeth A. Malia
Representative James Marzilli, Jr.
Representative Michael Moran
Representative Eugene L. O'Flaherty
Representative Anthony Petrucci
Representative Denise Provost
Representative Kathi-Anne Reinstein
Representative Michael F. Rush
Representative Byron Rushing
Representative Jeffrey Sanchez
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Representative Carl Sciortino
Representative Frank Israel Smizik
Representative Marie P. St. Fleur
Representative Timothy J. Toomey, Jr.
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